

Conceptualizing and Measuring Support for Democracy: A New Approach

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Abstract

Public support for a democratic system of government is thought to be one of the main bulwarks against democratic backsliding. Yet much of what we know about support for democracy is based on survey questions about “democracy,” a term that varies in meaning across countries and likely prompts socially desirable responses. Instead, we propose a new approach to measuring support for democracy: using a battery of 17 survey questions, we ask respondents from 19 national samples to evaluate the more granular rights and institutions that collectively constitute liberal democracy. We find considerable heterogeneity across countries in how our items cohere, but any disjunctures typically reveal faultlines in political cultures that might be exploited by authoritarian actors. We further identify a core set of seven items that provide a reliable and valid measure of public support for liberal democracy across our different samples.

Keywords: support for democracy; public opinion; survey research; measurement

Words: 9,365

1. Introduction

Democracies around the world face challenges from within. Elected leaders are attacking and undermining democratic norms and institutions, and winning re-election after doing so (Bermeo 2016; Svobik 2019; Waldner and Lust 2018). This raises the question of whether public support for democracy matters for the survival and quality of democratic regimes, as many scholars have argued (e.g., Claassen 2020; Dahl 1971; Diamond 1999; Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992; Linz and Stepan 1996; Lipset 1959; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998), or whether public opinion has little or no impact on the fate of democracy, as others have claimed (Fails and Pierce 2010; Hadenius and Teorell 2005; Przeworski 2019; Schmitter 2010; Tai, Hu, and Solt 2022).

Underlying and confounding this debate is the issue of how public support for democracy is conceptualized and measured. Most existing research relies on survey questions that ask respondents to rate democracy or express their preference for democracy over authoritarian regimes. These questions have a number of weaknesses. Public understanding of the concept of democracy varies across contexts and individuals (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2005; Dalton, Jou, and Shin 2007; König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022); the word is also believed to induce socially desirable response (Inglehart 2003; Schedler and Sarsfield 2007). With survey measures asking about “democracy” commonplace, it is little surprise that there is such disagreement among researchers as to whether support for democracy even matters at all.

Our goal in this paper is to advance the measurement of public support for democracy by developing and testing a new approach. Instead of asking citizens whether they support abstract and complex regimes like democracy, we ask them to evaluate the more granular and concrete rights, processes, and institutions that collectively constitute liberal democracy. We argue that this approach has three advantages over the conventional one. First, it avoids the ambiguity and bias associated with asking questions about “democracy.” Second, it aligns the measurement of public support for democracy with the measurement of democracy itself (which is almost always based on indicators of the presence and quality of democratic institutions), thereby facilitating research

into any links between support for democracy and democratic stability. Third, it allows for more nuanced and detailed insight into political cultures; in particular, the identification of potential vulnerabilities or threats to democracy that may be exploited by authoritarian actors.

To operationalize our approach, we follow the definition of liberal democracy used by the Varieties of Democracy project, one of the most widely-used sources of democracy indicators (see, e.g., Coppedge et al. 2016; Teorell et al. 2019). According to this definition – which rests heavily on Robert Dahl’s 1971 classic formulation – liberal democracy consists of eight distinct clusters of rights and institutions, such as free and fair elections, freedom of expression, and judicial oversight of the executive. Bearing in mind the varying forms that liberal democracy takes across the world, we develop a set of 17 survey questions to measure public support for these eight clusters of rights and institutions and administer these to samples of citizens from 19 countries across different regions and levels of development.

Analyzing the extent to which the responses to these questions form coherent patterns of support for liberal democracy, we find that there is considerable variation in how citizens connect different aspects of liberal democracy. For example, in electoral authoritarian countries, such as Hungary and Turkey, we find that support for universal suffrage is less connected with support for the other institutions of democracy. Support for protest rights is similarly detached from support for democracy in cases where significant, disruptive collective action has recently been observed, such as Argentina and Chile. As such, our battery allows analysts to diagnose and identify faultlines in political cultures that might allow authoritarian actors to undermine democracy.

For scholars more interested in a single measure of support for democracy than a diagnostic tool, we also provide a contribution. We identify a subset of seven of our questions that span the conceptual breadth of support for liberal democracy and show enough coherence across all countries to be combined into a single scale. We demonstrate that this scale has convergent and divergent validity, by showing moderate to strong correlations with existing measures of support for democracy and weak correlations with unrelated constructs such as political trust and populist attitudes. As such, whatever the aims of researchers, we argue that our questions — and our broader

approach — provide a springboard for future research on support for democracy, including studies of its causes and consequences.

2. Existing survey measures of support for democracy

Following the third wave of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s, public opinion scholars developed an interest in measuring public support for these new democracies (see Mattes 2018 for discussion). Leonardo Morlino and José Ramón Montero fielded a question in 1985, asking respondents from Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece whether they preferred democracy or dictatorship (Morlino and Montero 1995). A version of this question was later included in the 1988 and 1992 Eurobarometers:

Here are three opinions about political systems. Which one comes closest to your own way of thinking?

1. Democracy is the best political system in all circumstances
2. In certain circumstances a dictatorship could be a good thing
3. Whether we live in a democracy or under a dictatorship makes no difference to people like me.

After the fall of communism, scholars moved quickly to measure public support of democracy in Eastern Europe, with cross-national survey projects such as the New Democracies Barometer and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe project springing up (e.g., Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998). Along with the Morlino and Montero item, these projects pioneered some new survey measures of support for democracy. These asked specifically about support for various authoritarian alternatives to democracy. For example:

Our present system of government is not the only one that this country has had. Some people say that we would be better off if the country was governed differently. What do you think?

- Best to get rid of Parliament and elections and have a strong leader who can quickly decide everything.
- The army should govern the country.¹

By the late 1990s, the measurement of public support for democracy had “globalized” (Norris 2009). The above questions spread, in one form or another, to the other regional “barometer” surveys which began appearing in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of this phenomenon was the inclusion of measures of support for democracy in the third wave of the World Values Survey (WVS), which was fielded between 1995 and 1998 in 55 societies. In addition to two versions of the strong leader and army rule questions (but not the Morlino and Montero item), the WVS included questions asking specifically about support for democracy:

I’m going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing this country?

- Having a democratic political system

The measurement of public support for democracy has continued apace since the 1990s, using the same set of basic questions (albeit with plenty of cross-survey variation), asked every few years in a growing list of countries. By 2020, more than 30 years after questions of support for democracy began to be included in cross-national survey projects, a vast trove of data had accumulated: more than 1,600 national surveys, fielded in more than 150 countries, with each survey including between one and five questions asking about support for democracy.

¹The response options are (1) strongly agree, (2) somewhat agree, (3) somewhat disagree and (4) strongly disagree.

3. Problems with existing measures

Although these questions are now ubiquitous, they are also heavily criticized. Most prominent among these criticisms is the view that survey respondents pay “lip service” (Inglehart 2003) to questions about democracy, offering uncritical or supportive views. They are “questionnaire democrats” (Dalton 1994; Schedler and Sarsfield 2007) in other words, who try to avoid giving controversial or socially undesirable responses to questions about democracy. Consistent with these arguments are the high levels of support for democracy that emerge when respondents are asked to evaluate a democratic system (i.e., the third question cited above): more than 90% of respondents in most countries report a favorable opinion.² More telling evidence of social desirability bias is presented by de Jonge (2016), who finds that 11 percent of a Honduran sample supports authoritarian rule when measured using a list experiment, compared with only five percent who offered support in a direct question.

Yet, even if respondents are answering these survey questions sincerely, they may not understand democracy in the same way as experts (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2005; Dalton, Jou, and Shin 2007). One person might interpret democracy as involving civil liberties, a second might understand it to be about competitive elections, while a third might associate it with such unconventional qualities as income equality or peace. In addition, since national experiences with democracy vary considerably, questions about democracy might trigger very different associations in different countries (Ariely and Davidov 2011). Such concerns have prompted a growing body of research into how the public understands the concept of democracy (Dalton, Jou, and Shin 2007; Ferrín and Kriesi 2016; Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997). Although important, this research does not address the question of how we should measure public support for democracy.

²However, a very different picture emerges when one factors in whether respondents support authoritarian rule. As a Pew Research study of 38 national samples shows, only in Sweden do more than 50% of respondents support democracy *and* reject all forms of authoritarian rule (Wike et al. 2017).

Existing measures of support for democracy have also been criticized for lacking a solid conceptual foundation (König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022). These questions appear to measure evaluations of democracy and authoritarian alternatives, or perhaps preferences for democracy versus autocracy. Yet it is not clear which aspect of democracy, or even which of the many theoretical models of democracy (e.g., Held 2006) are involved. It seems an unpropitious point of departure to measure a variable shorn of its conceptual foundation. This incongruence between the concept and measures is especially striking considering that democracy is one of the most deeply theorized concepts in political theory.

Finally, standard measures of support for democracy may also be criticized for being too broad. As we have seen in recent examples of democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016; Svobik 2019; Waldner and Lust 2018), it is not “democracy” that is attacked by elected authoritarians, but specific features thereof, including opposition parties, judges, the media, and civil society organizations. Indeed, majoritarian values, as epitomized by the voice of “the people” are frequently valorized by such leaders, usually at the expense of minority rights, another value of (liberal) democracy. To allow further insight into whether support for democracy helps prevent democratic backsliding, we need to take a more granular approach to measuring the former, i.e., by focusing on the components of liberal democracy itself.³

4. Alternative approaches to measuring support for democracy

Although the cross-national comparative literature has been characterized by a focus on questions about democracy itself, political scientists studying particular countries have often more nuanced and finely-grained measures. As early as 1968, Max Kaase pioneered such an approach to measuring democratic support in Germany (Kaase 1971; see also Dalton 1994 and Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2020). Instead of asking about democracy in principle, he asked respondents for their

³One important caveat is that questions regarding attitudes to “democracy” itself remain important for certain development funders and government agencies.

views on different democratic rights (e.g., freedom of expression), values (e.g., individual vs. collective interests), and norms (e.g., an adversarial vs. collaborative opposition). A similar approach was used by Gibson in his studies of post-Communist Russia and post-Apartheid South Africa (Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992; Gibson 2003). Relying heavily on Dahl, Gibson developed measures tapping four component institutions and processes of democracy: support for a multiparty system; political tolerance; the “relative valuation attached to individual liberty and social order”; and support for competitive elections. Both of these approaches are valuable improvements to the status quo. However, this approach fails to disentangle the constituent institutions of (liberal) democracy, with the values and norms that liberal democracy requires (or is believed to instantiate), e.g., individual vs. collective interests and liberty vs. order.

Another prominent alternative approach is that undertaken by Ferrín, Kriesi, and colleagues in a special module on “Europeans understandings and evaluations of democracy” fielded in the 2012 European Social Survey (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016). They distinguish a list of important rights and institutions that correspond to a liberal model of democracy (they do the same for models of social and direct democracy). They then ask respondents how important these rights and institutions are for democracy and how successfully these rights and institutions are implemented in the actual political system in which respondents live. By doing so, Ferrín and Kriesi (2016) allow the elusive concept of legitimacy to be measured. But their questions tap public understanding of the concept of democracy rather than public support for democracy itself. We therefore consider this research as complementary to our goal of measuring support for liberal democracy.

Other scholars have developed similar measures that focus more closely on measuring support for the constitutive institutions of democracy. The third wave of the Afrobarometer survey project introduced new questions that asked respondents about their support for “four key institutions that embody democratic rules: open elections, competing political parties, legal constraints on the executive, and legislative autonomy” (Bratton 2010, 108). The 2006 AmericasBarometer included fifteen items measuring support for Dahl’s (1971) notion of polyarchy, an institutional conceptualization of electoral democracy (see Carlin and Singer 2011). Recent studies by van der

Brug et al. (2021) and Zaslove and Meijers (2023) have similarly measured support for democracy by asking respondents about multiple aspects of democracy. While drawing inspiration (and in some instances, survey questions) from these works, we seek to ground our measures more clearly in an operational definition of liberal democracy. We describe our approach for doing so in the next section.

5. Our measurement approach

We seek to measure public support for the rights and institutions of liberal democracy and propose that this approach will provide a fruitful alternative for measuring support for democracy in general. As the previous section has demonstrated, a number of scholars have previously adopted a similar measurement strategy. Our approach differs in that we seek to align our measures as closely as possible with a conceptualization of liberal democracy, and indeed, with an operational definition thereof.

We are aided in this task by the work of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. V-Dem measures the extent to which five varieties (or models) of democracy are present in national polities across time: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy (Coppedge et al. 2016). To do so, the V-Dem investigators disaggregate each variety of democracy into its constituent institutions and processes. They then develop specific indicators for these constituent institutions, before finally asking country experts to score particular countries on each of these indicators.

We focus here on liberal democracy, and specifically, on V-Dem’s definition thereof. Along with electoral democracy, this is the theoretical model of democracy most clearly in mind when political scientists consider transitions to democracy (i.e., democratization) as well as breakdowns in democracy (or backsliding). For V-Dem, liberal democracy is a combination of electoral democracy and the “liberal component” of democracy.⁴ Electoral democracy follows Dahl’s (1971) con-

⁴As such, our focus on liberal democracy allows other scholars to use the same approach even

cept of polyarchy closely, with the following five institutions and processes included: (1) freedom of expression, (2) freedom of association, (3) universal suffrage, (4) key decision-makers being elected, and (5) free and fair elections (Coppedge et al. 2016). The liberal component “embodies the intrinsic value of protecting individual and minority rights against potential ‘tyranny of the majority’ and state repression more generally” (Coppedge et al. 2016, 582). It has the following three constituent institutions and processes: (1) judicial and (2) legislative constraints on the executive, and (3) equality before the law.

Taken together, liberal democracy is therefore operationalized by V-Dem as having eight component institutions, with five pertaining to electoral democracy and three pertaining to the “liberal component.” We follow suit, conceptualizing support for liberal democracy as comprising support for electoral democracy and support for the liberal component of democracy, which we refer to as “rule of law” (Fukuyama 2011).⁵ Our items are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

We generally field two items for each of the eight dimensions, using these to capture some of the different aspects of each component as these are described by V-Dem. For example, support for freedom of expression includes questions relating to support for citizens’ freedom of expression as well as support for free media. For one component, freedom of association, we thought that three items were required, measuring support for three kinds of associational life: political parties, protests, and civil society organizations. Within each pair of questions (or trio in the case of freedom of association), we varied the valence of the questions to counteract respondent acquiescence effects (i.e., the tendency to agree with survey questions; see, e.g., Billiet and McClendon 2000; Watson 1992).

Within the ambit of our conceptual approach, we used three principles in designing questions if they are interested in support for electoral democracy.

⁵There has been a recent dispute about the accuracy of the V-Dem ratings (see Little and Meng 2023 and Knutsen et al. 2023). However, this dispute focuses on the issue of potential bias in expert ratings, not the V-Dem definition of liberal democracy.

Table 1. Support for Electoral Democracy Questions

Concept	Question
1.1 Support for freedom of expression	
Freedom of expression	<i>FreeExp1.</i> People should be free to criticize the government even in times of great crisis.
Free media	<i>FreeExp2.</i> The government should be able to censor media sources that are too critical (from AmericasBarometer 2006).
1.2 Support for freedom of association	
Political parties	<i>FreeAssc1.</i> This country would be better off if there were only one political party (from Gibson 2003).
Protest	<i>FreeAssc2.</i> The right to protest should be protected even when protestors inconvenience others.
Civil society	<i>FreeAssc3.</i> The government should have the power to ban organizations that promote subversive values.
1.3. Support for universal suffrage	
Voter competence	<i>UniSuff1.</i> The universal right to vote must be questioned when so many voters are poorly informed and easily misled.
Political tolerance	<i>UniSuff2.</i> All adult [Country adjective] citizens should have the right to vote, even individuals holding extreme views.
1.4. Support for key decision-makers being elected	
Technocratic rule	<i>ElecDecMk1.</i> Our government would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected independent experts rather than politicians or the people (from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).
Non-political authority	<i>ElecDecMk2.</i> Non-political authorities, such as [one important & respected non-political authority in country] should never be able to overrule elected politicians.
1.5 Support for free and fair elections	
Respect results	<i>FFElect1.</i> We should respect the results of elections, no matter which [candidate/party] wins.
Bend rules	<i>FFElect2.</i> Governments are justified in bending electoral rules in their favor when their opponents have also done so in the past.

Notes: The response options for all items are: 1. Strongly agree; 2. Agree; 3. Neither agree nor disagree; 4. Disagree; 5. Strongly disagree

tions. First, we tried to use existing survey questions that have been tested in past research, wherever these appeared to tap into one of the eight institutional clusters implied by the concept of liberal democracy. Second, we attempted to mitigate the social desirability that might result from

Table 2. Support for Rule of Law Questions

Concept	Question
2.1. Support for judicial constraints on executive	
Judicial review	<i>JudCnstr1.</i> [Country adjective] courts should be able to overrule the [government / president] if policies are judged to be illegal.
Compliance with judiciary	<i>JudCnstr2.</i> The [government / president] should be able to ignore court rulings that are regarded as politically biased (from Simonovits and Littvay 2022).
2.2 Supports for legislative constraints on executive	
Compliance with legislature	<i>LegCnstr1.</i> If [national parliament] hinders the work of the government, it should be ignored (From AmericasBarometer 2006).
Legislative review	<i>LegCnstr2.</i> [Legislators] should be able to question and oversee political decisions taken by the government, even when this slows down progress.
2.3. Support for equality before the law	
Rigorous enforcement of law	<i>EqLaw1.</i> The government should be able to bend the law in order to solve pressing social and political problems (from Gibson 2003).
Equal access to justice	<i>EqLaw2.</i> All [Country demonym] should enjoy the same legal rights, regardless of their political beliefs.

Notes: The response options for all items are: 1. Strongly agree; 2. Agree; 3. Neither agree nor disagree; 4. Disagree; 5. Strongly disagree

questions about such *prima facie* desirable rights such as e.g., freedom of speech, by wording questions in concrete or specific terms (e.g., Prothro and Grigg 1960). For example, we don't ask respondents whether they approve of free speech as such, but whether people should be "free to criticize the government" and whether "the government should be able to censor media sources." Third, we sought to develop questions that would work across political systems. To do so, we allowed for small variations in wording, such as "candidate" or "president" in presidential systems and "party" and "government" in parliamentary systems. In one of the questions relating to support for key decision-makers being elected, we allowed a salient non-political authority to be named. The "military" was used in most cases (see supplementary information for further details).

6. Data and Research Design

We field these questions in a number and variety of different national samples, which allows us to examine how the battery operates in different settings. The samples are described in Table 3. We used online surveys with non-probability samples gathered according to certain demographic quotas, except in Portugal and Taiwan where we employed traditional probability samples. These probability samples – as well as online quota samples in more established polling markets such as Britain – will approach representativeness, while samples from less developed contexts will be less representative.⁶

Our analysis of these datasets proceeds in three steps. First, we test whether the items cohere into conceptual models of (support for) liberal democracy. There are two interpretations of the V-Dem conceptualization: a unidimensional liberal democracy scale, and two (perhaps correlated) dimensions corresponding to electoral democracy and the rule of law. We examine the correspondence between our data and these theoretical models using confirmatory factor analysis models fit separately in each sample. Since we have items of varying valence, we also include an orthogonal methods factor to capture respondent acquiescence when questions are framed such that agreement indicates support for democracy (Billiet and McClendon 2000).

Second, we examine more closely any heterogeneity in item fit. Our approach rests on the assumption that liberal democracy can be defined as a cluster of several institutions and rights as proposed by experts. To the extent that citizens' opinions cluster in this fashion, we can speak of their levels of support for the expert-defined concept of liberal democracy. But citizens may see things differently; for example, they may not necessarily associate the universal right to vote

⁶Samples from middle-income countries such as South Africa, Brazil, and Peru are more likely to include higher socio-economic status citizens, who are more exposed to globalized views of democracy than their less well-off compatriots, and therefore more likely to hold internally coherent schemas of liberal democracy. As such, the nature of our middle-income samples may underestimate the cross-country variation in democratic attitudes.

Table 3. Details of Samples

Country	<i>N</i>	Fieldwork dates	Sample	Mode	Firm
Argentina	1,018	19-23 Dec 2022	Quota	Online	Netquest
Britain	2,071	3-19 Oct 2022	Quota	Online	Yougov
Brazil	1,516	25-31 Oct 2022	Quota	Online	Netquest
Chile	1,017	19-23 Dec 2022	Quota	Online	Netquest
Germany	2,500	12-29 Dec 2022	Quota	Online	Respondi
Greece	989	20 Jun - 8 Jul 2022	Quota	Online	Dyndata
Hungary	1,000	5-13 Oct 2022	Quota	Online	NRC
Israel	1,512	9-20 Aug 2023	Quota	Online	iPanel
Mexico	2,401	27 May - 23 Jun 2023	Quota	Online	Netquest
Netherlands	4,344	22-30 Mar 2023	Quota	Online	Kieskompas
Norway	1,000	5-15 Jan 2023	Quota	Online	Yougov
Peru	2,189	27 May - 28 Jun 2023	Quota	Online	Netquest
Poland	3,002	14-27 Apr 2023	Quota	Online	PBS
Portugal	379	11 Jan - 8 Feb 2023	Probability	Online	CUL ^a
South Africa	500	20-25 Jun 2023	Quota	Online	GeoPoll
Spain	3,462	6 Apr - 2 May 2023	Quota	Online	Kieskompas
Taiwan	1,158	22-27 Jun 2022	Probability	Phone	ESC ^b
Turkey	2,629	15 Dec 2022 - 22 Mar 2023	Stratified	Online	Meta ^c
USA	2,370	27 May - 28 Jun 2022	Quota	Online	Yougov

Notes: ^a City University London (in coordination with the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon). ^b Election Studies Center, National Chenchi University, Taiwan. ^c Respondents recruited using Facebook and Instagram advertisements. See supplementary materials for further details on each sample.

with the desirability of judicial review of government decisions. By considering which clusters of institutions correlate in particular contexts, we gain insight into potential faultlines in national political cultures that may be exploited by undemocratic challengers.

Third, we seek to identify a subset of our items that can reliably and validly be aggregated into a single scale. Such a scale would be of interest to other researchers, should it exist, especially if it can be measured with fewer than 17 items. In deriving this subset of items, we consider both the coherence of resulting items into account but also the breadth of coverage of the underlying concept of support for liberal democracy. We also test the convergent and divergent validity of the shortened scale by examining its correlations with existing measures of support for democracy, as well as conceptually more distinct concepts like satisfaction with democracy and ideology.⁷

⁷An important consideration is the measurement equivalence of our questions and scales (e.g.,

7. Testing Model Fit

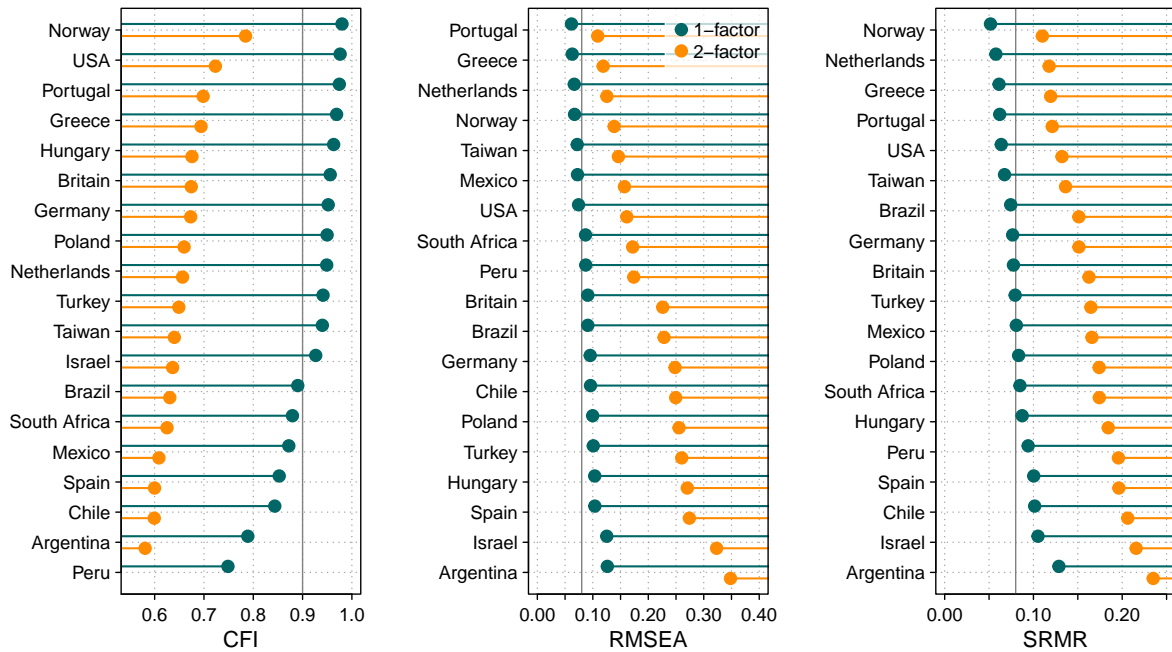
We begin by examining the extent to which our data fit the conceptual models of liberal democracy put forward by V-Dem and embedded in our 17 questions. We consider two conceptual models, a unidimensional liberal democracy model and a bi-dimensional electoral democracy and rule of law model. These models are fit separately in each national sample. Fit metrics are displayed in Figure 1.

The unidimensional support for liberal democracy model fits better in every sample than the two-dimensional, electoral democracy and rule of law model. Indeed, the latter model fits very poorly indeed as Figure 1 shows: across all cases, the fit metrics fall short of thresholds generally used to distinguish models that fit adequately from those that do not. In addition, the two substantive dimensions of this model are found to be strongly correlated in most cases, indicating that citizens generally do not distinguish between the electoral institutions of liberal democracy and the rule of law institutions. As such, we conclude that there is no need to model support for electoral democracy as distinct from support for the rule of law.

However, while the unidimensional model fits better than the two-dimensional model in relative terms, it does not always fit well in absolute terms. In only six cases (Norway, the US, Portugal, Greece, the Netherlands, and Taiwan) does the unidimensional model of support for

Ariely and Davidov 2011). Given that we use different methods to field surveys, different languages in different contexts, and indeed, different wordings for certain questions, we expect that any scales will lack cross-national equivalence. Indeed, the evidence in Figure 2 suggests that a unidimensional measure of support for liberal democracy does not meet even the simplest form of equivalence, i.e., configural equivalence. As such, the empirical strategy outlined above focuses on comparing results from each sample in absolute, not relative terms. In other words, we compare results to some objective threshold or criterion, e.g., does a certain theoretical model fit? Are the correlations with criterion variables substantial and positive?, etc.

Figure 1. Model Fit of 1 vs. 2 Dimensional Support for Liberal Democracy



CFI: Confirmatory Fit Index; RMSEA: Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation; SRMR: Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. One-factor fit metrics are shown in teal and two-factor are shown in orange. Both include an additional acquiescence factor. Solid vertical lines indicate thresholds typically used to indicate adequate fit.

liberal democracy show at least an adequate fit across our three fit metrics. In some cases (e.g., Argentina), this model falls considerably short of this standard. To be sure, there are many fit metrics and various thresholds have been put forward for each, but it is clear that a single liberal democracy factor only fits adequately in around a third of our samples and fits poorly in one or two.

Finally, we note a pattern that is evident in how well the conceptual model fits across our cases. Our items cohere more readily into a single unidimensional measure of support for liberal democracy in samples from countries that are wealthier, Western, and have longer histories as democracies. In these countries, citizens view the rights and institutions of democracy similarly to how experts define liberal democracy. This heterogeneity in how citizens of different countries understand democracy has been of great interest to political scientists (e.g., Dalton, Jou, and Shin 2007). One of the features of our approach is what it reveals the underlying cognitive structure of

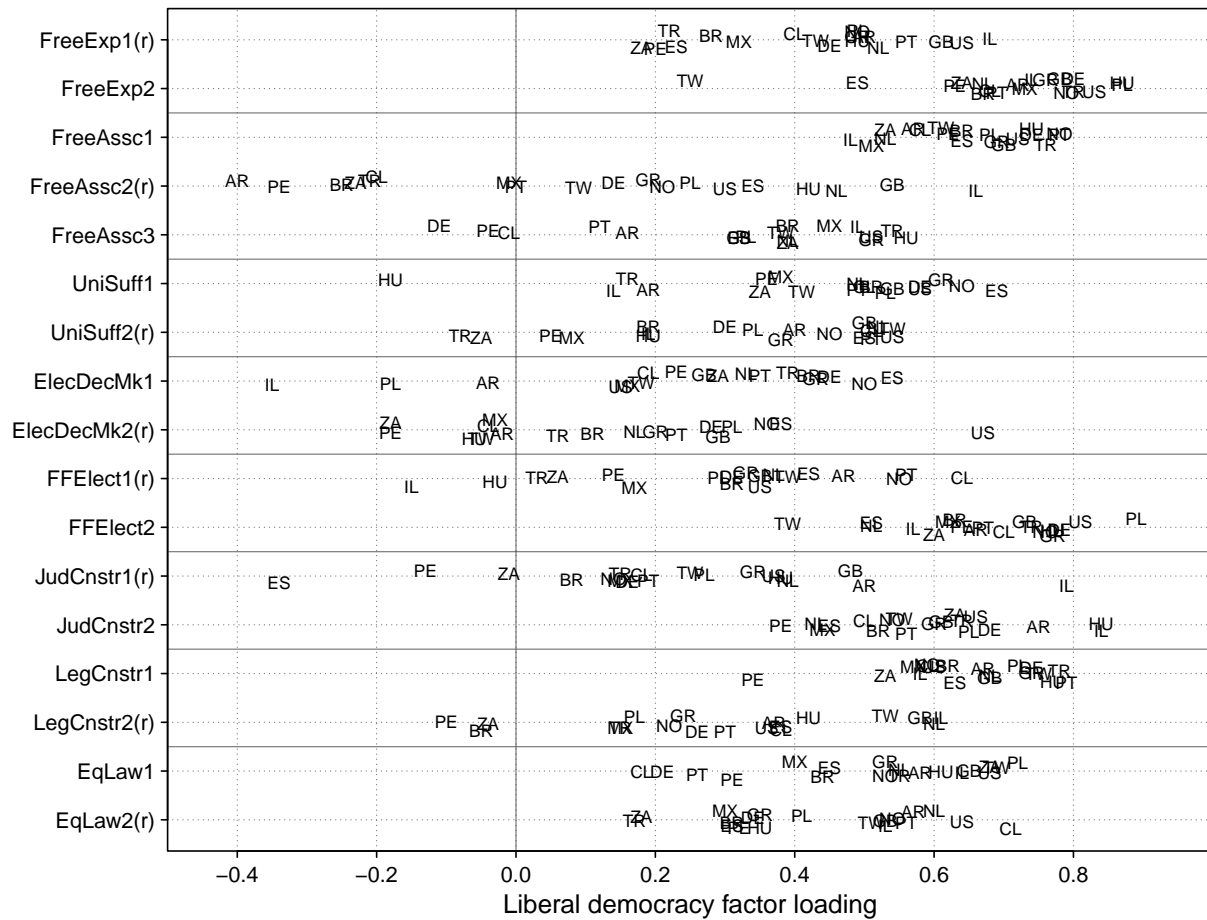
how people categorize the different aspects of democratic rights and institutions. This is where our attention turns in the next section.

8. Examining Item Heterogeneity

In this section, we examine the extent to which our 17 items are connected to each other, and the underlying latent variable of support for liberal democracy. To carry out this analysis, we focus on the factor loadings from the one-dimensional CFA model discussed in the previous section. These factor loadings are presented in Figure 2, with item codes in rows (see Tables 1 and 2) and two-digit country codes used to indicate the corresponding sample. To make the figure more digestible we have recoded all items such that higher responses indicate greater support for democracy; all items should therefore – in principle – have positive factor loadings.

We can see that there is considerable heterogeneity in how items fit across both items and countries. Some items are always central to a one-dimensional construct of support for liberal democracy: they achieve moderate to substantial factor loadings across all cases (e.g., FreeAssc1, LegCnstr1). Other items, in contrast, are more weakly connected, on average, to latent public support for liberal democracy in most cases (e.g., ElecDecMk1, JudCnstr1). Most items show heterogeneous linkages with the underlying latent variable, with some robust positive loadings, some weakly positive, and some loadings close to zero or even negative. Negative loadings indicate that citizens are less likely to offer a supportive view of that particular liberal democratic right or institution to the extent that they otherwise support liberal democratic rights and institutions. On the one hand, this is a marked departure from what we would expect were citizens' opinions shaped by a single latent dimension of support for liberal democracy. On the other hand, there is often considerable variation across countries in the connections between items and the latent variable. This perhaps indicates that there are country-specific cultural or political factors that are operating to produce such heterogeneous variance. We, therefore, turn to a deeper exploration of these results, proceeding by examining each of the eight theoretical components of support for liberal democracy in turn.

Figure 2. Heterogeneity in Item Functioning



Factor loadings drawn from the one-factor CFA. Items annotated with (r) are reverse-coded such that higher values indicate more support for democratic institutions. See Tables 1 and 2 for item wordings. A small amount of noise is added to the y-coordinates of each point to allow the country labels to be more easily distinguished.

Freedom of expression. Our measures of support for freedom of expression generally correlate with a latent dimension of support for liberal democracy. The exceptions to this general trend tend to occur in newer or more unstable democracies such as Peru, South Africa, Chile, Turkey, and Taiwan. Freedom of expression is a well-known democratic right, and one that is generally popular, hence the good fit of these items (e.g., Dalton, Jou, and Shin 2007).

Freedom of association. The political party item (FreeAssc1) shows strong and remarkably consistent connections with the latent variable across all cases. In contrast, the protest item (FreeAssc2) does not fit well, with respondents in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Turkey, Chile, and

South Africa being *less* likely to support freedom of protest to the extent that they support the other institutions of liberal democracy. These results may be partly rooted in experiences of disruptive protest, e.g., the 2019 “social explosion” (*estallido social*) in Chile and the long-standing *piquetero* movement in Argentina, but likely also indicates that many people do not see protest rights to be an inalienable feature of liberal democracy. The Israel results present an interesting counterpoint: in a case where pro-democratic protests occurred around the time of our survey, citizens come to see protest rights as strongly connected with other democratic institutions, i.e., as central to liberal democracy.

Universal suffrage. Along with free and fair elections, universal suffrage arguably lies at the core of the concept of liberal democracy. In most cases, both of our questions correlate robustly and positively with the unidimensional support for liberal democracy. However, in the electoral authoritarian cases of Turkey and Hungary and the middle-income cases of South Africa, Mexico, and Peru, connections are weaker. Indeed, in these cases, one or both of these items are essentially orthogonal to the underlying support for the liberal democracy scale. We suggest that these findings indicate faultlines in these nations’ political cultures, which have likely been opened up by forces such as populism and inequality, and which may yet be exploited (further) by political elites.

Key decision-makers being elected. Support for this component of liberal democracy shows the weakest connections with support for the other institutions and rights of liberal democracy. This may be due to the complexity of the concept, which requires respondents to process the perhaps unfamiliar notion that some authority other than the official political leader is making important national decisions, and then to evaluate their support for such a possibility. Our first item also asks about experts (ElecDecMk1), with its poor fit showing that citizens do not see much of a contradiction in supporting technocratic rule and supporting the institutions of liberal democracy (see also Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; König 2022). The wording of the second item varies, with different non-political authorities being used in different contexts. It cohered most clearly with support for liberal democracy in the United States, where “the military” was used as

the non-political authority.⁸ In many samples there is little to no correlation between this item and support for liberal democracy, indicating the citizens did not perceive any contradiction between that authority overruling politicians and having a democratic system.

Free and fair elections. Support for free and fair elections is another foundational aspect of the concept of support for liberal democracy. We find that respondents' opinions on these questions generally correlate robustly with the overall scale. There are some exceptions: Israelis, Turks, Hungarians, Peruvians, and South Africans tend to view the “respect election results” question (FFElect1) as distinct from other democratic rights and institutions. In Hungary and Turkey, this result likely reflects the ambiguity of election outcomes in contexts where authoritarian leaders have already compromised the quality of democracy. In the other cases, this finding can be taken to indicate concerning aspects of the political culture that might be exploited by authoritarian actors in future.

Judicial constraints. Support for judicial constraints of the executive is the first of our rule of law components. Our item measuring support for the executive being required to comply with judicial decisions (JudCnstr2), is adapted from Simonovits and Littvay (2022) and proves to fit well across most cases. Support for judicial review (JudCnstr1) shows a substantially weaker fit, perhaps indicating the “minoritarian dilemma” (Bickel 1986) implicit in this institution. We note that Spanish respondents perceive little of a connection between judicial constraints and other components of liberal democracy, which may indicate how the conflict over Catalan independence has politicized public views of the judiciary (e.g., Rodon 2020).

Legislative constraints. The first item of our legislative constraint items (LegCnstr1) fits very well, with the partial exception of Peru, where the fit is more modest. The second (LegCnstr2) shows more heterogeneity. Respondents from the middle-income countries of Peru, South Africa, Brazil, and Turkey perceive little connection between legislative constraints and other democratic institutions when the former are described as possibly “slow[ing] down progress.” Here we see evidence that support for democratic institutions can be eroded by framings of such institutions

⁸In addition, an earlier, positively-valenced version of the question was used in the US.

as inefficient or ineffective, echoing classic arguments made by Lipset (1959) and Dahl (1971), among others.

Equality before the law. Although arguably one of the more abstruse components of V-Dem's liberal democracy, support for equality before the law generally cohered well with support for the other institutions and rights we consider. There are, of course, some cases in which one or both of these items showed weaker loadings. In Chile, Portugal, and Peru, support for rigorous enforcement of the law (EqLaw1) is relatively weakly connected to support for democracy. And in South Africa and Turkey, support for equal access to justice, "regardless of political beliefs" is similarly detached from broader support for liberal democracy.

In sum, we find that our 17 items generally cohere around a single dimension of support for liberal democracy, but the degree of coherence varies across countries, showing more heterogeneity in non-Western, middle-income, and newer democracies. Our analysis of this heterogeneity is moreover revealing. In many instances, disconnects between experts' and citizens' views of liberal democracy appear to be caused by political events and political actors. The disjunctures between some items, e.g., support for universal suffrage, and latent support for democracy are worrying faultlines that can be (or are being) exploited by elites. Other examples of discordance, e.g., support for judicial oversight in Spain, reflect the perhaps temporary influence of current events. One of the merits of our battery is how it can be used to diagnose political cultures in this fashion. However, some researchers may not be interested in this kind of analysis, but rather want to have a reliable and valid indicator of support for democracy using a small number of items. We address this need in our final section.

9. Deriving and Validating a Shortened Battery

The final step of our analysis is to identify and test a shortened set of items. The goal is to remove some of the weaker items while still retaining coverage across as many of the theoretical components of liberal democracy as possible. A shortened battery of this kind is often thought desirable because it fits more readily in researchers' survey instruments.

Specifically, we propose a seven-item battery that includes a single item from seven of the eight components of liberal democracy. The component we omit is support for key decision-makers being elected. As we explained in the previous section, our items did not correlate reliably with the items tapping the other seven dimensions because – we suspect – this is an obscure and complex dimension of democratic functioning for respondents to process in the course of an online survey. Nevertheless, the seven components of support for liberal democracy covered by our items span the breadth of the concept.

Within each of the components of liberal democracy, we select the item that coheres best with the underlying latent variable of support for liberal democracy across all samples. We use the loadings from our CFA for this task (see Figure 2). We use the following items in our shortened battery: FreeExp2, FreeAssc1, UniSuff1, FFElect2, JudCnstr2, LegCnstr1, and EqLaw1.

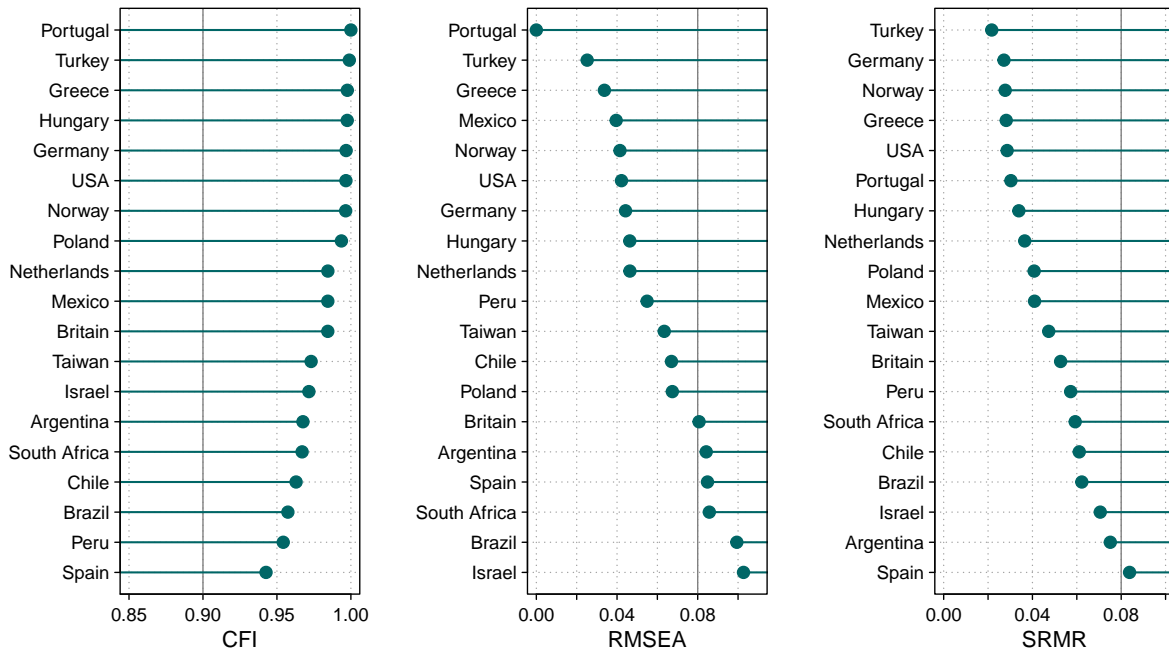
To test the reliability and validity of this shortened battery, we examine (1) the fit metrics of a one-factor CFA, (2) the reliability of an additive scale of all seven items, (3) correlations between an additive scale of the items and several criterion variables. We discuss these analyses below.

In Figure 3, we present the fit metrics for a unidimensional CFA model estimated using the seven items we have just described. The model fits considerably better when using the shortened battery. In all samples, the CFI exceeds the threshold of adequacy; in most samples, the RMSEA and SRMR indices does so as well.

Next, we consider the internal coherence of the shortened scale across our samples. The estimates of Cronbach's alpha (obtained using polychoric correlation matrices) are presented in the left-most panel of Figure 4. The scale is reliable in most samples except perhaps Peru, where the reliability falls just short of the benchmark of 0.70. It should be borne in mind that these reliability estimates are generated after selecting items that fit well in the larger battery; while reliability was not a criterion used in selection, it is likely that retest reliabilities will be lower than those reported in Figure 4. At the same time, we selected items that cover the theoretical range of the concept of liberal democracy, so we would expect a modest degree of inter-item correlation.

Finally, we examine the validity of our measures by assessing the correlations between

Figure 3. Model Fit of Shortened Support for Liberal Democracy Scale

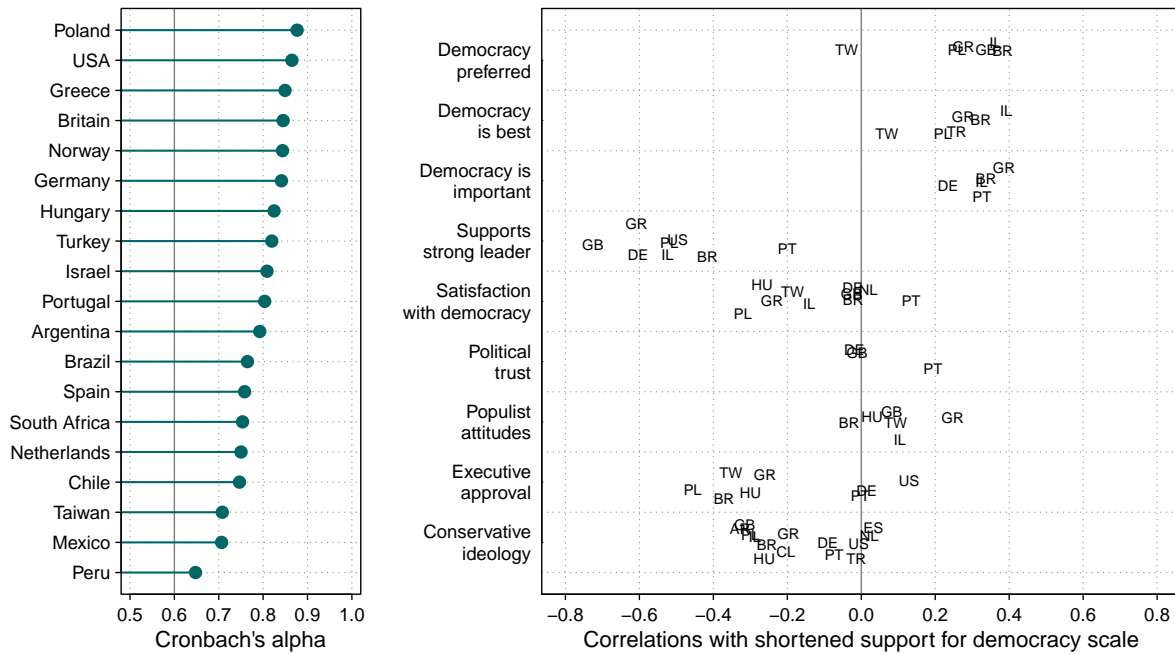


Fit metrics from one-factor CFA using shortened 7-item scale. No acquiescence factor included.

a scale composed of the seven items and different criterion variables (right panel of Figure 4; see the supplementary materials for a table of correlations). The first set of criterion variables we test are existing measures of support for democracy and rejection of authoritarian alternatives (first four rows of Figure 4). Although existing survey measures of support for democracy have their flaws, e.g., for using the word “democracy,” we nevertheless expect these variables to show moderate to strong correlations with our shortened scale, given that the latter focuses on such familiar institutions of democracy as free and fair elections and freedom of speech. These are tests of convergent validity, in other words.

We generally observe correlations of this magnitude: the criterion variables capturing preference for democracy over authoritarian rule, beliefs that democracy is the best system, and evaluations of how important it is to have a democratic system show positive correlations in the 0.2 to 0.4 range in most cases with support for liberal democracy. The one exception is Taiwan, where

Figure 4. Reliability and Convergent vs. Divergent Validity of Shortened Support for Liberal Democracy Scale



Left panel: Cronbach's alpha for the shortened scale in each country, estimated using polychoric correlations. Right panel: Correlations between shortened liberal democracy scale and various criterion variables. The wording of the criterion variables varies across samples: see supplementary materials for details. Polyserial correlations are used if the criterion variable has fewer than eight response categories; Pearson's correlations are otherwise used. Only certain criterion variables were included in each survey.

the correlations are close to zero.⁹ Even stronger correlations are observed between our scale and support for strong leader questions, with five of the six samples showing correlations in the range -0.4 to -0.8 .

We test the divergent validity of the shortened scale by comparing it to several variables that should not be strongly related to support for liberal democracy. We have up to five such variables: evaluations of the political system (satisfaction with democracy and political trust), populist

⁹In Taiwan, the word “democracy” likely brings to mind the island’s tense relationship with China, with opinions about democracy capturing a degree of anti-China sentiment. Our support for liberal democracy scale should be less susceptible to such connotations since it avoids word “democracy.”

attitudes, government or presidential approval, and ideological self-placement. Although satisfaction with democracy is sometimes used a measure of democratic attitudes, more careful analyses reveal that it is an ambiguous question that tends to be correlated with government approval (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998). Indeed, we see modest correlations with support for liberal democracy, with most of these being negative – as indeed are the correlations between support for liberal democracy and executive approval. Political trust is also regarded as a more specific form of political support that is distinct from support for democracy; indeed, we see low correlations with support for liberal democracy. Correlations with a populist attitudes scale are also low, consistent with existing research using traditional measures of support for democracy (Espinosa et al. 2022).

We observe low to moderate correlations with political ideology (generally left vs. right self-placement) and approval of the executive. These correlations are perhaps stronger than that which we expect given the conceptual distinction between support for the institutions of liberal democracy and support for the government or president of the day. Where the governing party or president is from the political right, we usually observe a negative correlation with support for liberal democracy, particularly in Brazil, Poland, and Hungary, where the executives at the time of the survey were right-wing populist. The only exception to this pattern is Taiwan, where – as we have noted – politics is oriented mainly around a national identity cleavage. Conservative ideological views also tend to be negatively correlated with support for liberal democracy. As such, although ideology and executive approval have traditionally been orthogonal to support for democracy, these variables seem to have become connected in recent years, likely due to undemocratic or illiberal appeals from certain actors on the political right.

10. Conclusion

The question of how citizens relate to democracy is crucial for the survival and quality of democratic regimes. However, the standard survey measures of support for democracy are problematic, as they reference abstract and complex regimes such as democracy and dictatorship, which can have different meanings across contexts and individuals. To overcome this problem, we propose a

more fine-grained and concrete approach to measuring support for democracy, based on the specific rights and institutions that constitute liberal democracy in practice. We develop a battery of 17 items that tap support for the eight components of liberal democracy described by the Varieties of Democracy project, and then field this battery in a diverse set of 19 national samples.

We find that public attitudes regarding the rights and institutions of liberal democracy are generally oriented around a main dimension of support for liberal democracy. However, people in countries that are poorer, non-Western, or less democratic tend to have more heterogeneous views on democracy than those in richer, Western, or more democratic countries, i.e., their attitudes are less coherent. Yet those items that are more weakly connected with general support for liberal democracy tend to reveal the influence of political events and actors. For example, we find that support for protest rights are weakly or negatively linked with support for liberal democracy, especially in cases like Argentina and Brazil that had experienced significant disruptive protests at the time of their surveys. As such, our battery allows scholars to diagnose weaknesses or faultlines in political cultures that can be, or have been, exploited by political actors. This is particularly evident in the cases of Turkey and Hungary, where democracy has experienced substantial erosion, and where citizens now see little connection between universal suffrage and other institutions of liberal democracy.

Not all scholars will be seeking a battery of items for diagnosing weaknesses in political cultures; many simply require a measure of support for democracy that improves upon the crude items that are currently available. To this end, we have identified a shortened subset of seven of our items that can be used to create a unidimensional scale of support for liberal democracy. These seven items cover the breadth of the concept of liberal democracy but still form a coherent and reliable scale in all samples. The scale also shows evidence of convergent and divergent validity in its solid correlations with existing measures of support for democracy as well as weaker correlations with more distinct concepts like political trust.

We acknowledge that our approach is not the final word on this topic, and that there is room for improvement and refinement in future work. We arguably did not manage to quite capture the

component of support for key decision-makers being elected in our measures. More extensive analyses that use multiple items for each of the components of liberal democracy, and that cover more countries in the global South, would be welcome. It would furthermore be valuable to examine how clusters of citizens group together the rights and institutions of democracy (e.g., Bertsou and Caramani 2022; Carlin and Singer 2011; Schedler and Sarsfield 2007) and to explore citizen support for other models of democracy, e.g., direct democracy (König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022). We hope that this paper serves as a springboard for such future studies of public support for democracy, its causes, its consequences, and of course, its conceptualization and measurement.

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